

**In the Heartland**  
**Strategic Planning for Catholic Schools**

**By Bishop Richard Pates**  
**Bishop of Des Moines**

On Thursday, March 1<sup>st</sup>, with direction provided by the counseling group, Meitler, the Diocese of Des Moines undertook “Strategic Planning for Catholic Schools.”

The planning process is scheduled to stretch out for some 18 months and cover every facet of our present and future school operations. The anticipated outcome is a 10 year strategic plan which will provide a road map for our diocesan system and individual schools.

As we enter into the process, we do so on the basis of a solid foundation. There is genuine commitment and heavy investment in our schools which is rewarded with strong and faith-filled institutions. Our priests and the supporting parishioners, our administrators, diocesan and local, our teachers and staff and our families and quite obviously students constitute a united framework which is producing outstanding results. I am immensely proud of our schools. But we cannot stand on our laurels. There are many stiff challenges to face in order to maintain a standard of excellence.

As the study emerges, there are three particular facets that draw my attention. They are:

Diocesan School System. Today there are 17 schools and approximately 6200 students which make up the diocesan school system. The schools have engaged their mission through individual parishes. Dowling Catholic High School and St. Albert Catholic draw from the parishes which surround them.

Isn't it time to reflect upon how schools might develop specializations? St. Anthony School has a full Spanish immersion program. Are there other schools that might focus on math, STEM, etc? The system could give birth to forward thinking which would serve the needs of the students, look to job opportunities and build on natural talent and inclination.

Secondly, it seems past time, where feasible, to move our schools beyond parish institutions and have them available across the board to all in the diocesan community. This development would expand the identification of our schools beyond a parochial operation.

The second facet of special interest to me is FUNDING. Currently school funding consists of a combination of tuition paid by the student's family, parish subsidies, grants from the schools, diocesan funds (Project Hope), government assistance through Catholic Tuition Organization, transportation and textbook assistance.

Together, this combination of resources has enabled our schools to survive requiring significant sacrifices by many. Particularly stretched in this configuration is what we refer to as the "middle class." The wealthy have no problem meeting tuition costs and those on the lower end of the economic spectrum are receiving significant help.

Yet our Catholic schools are doing the same exact service as the public schools: fulfilling the responsibility of the state to educate its children. The significant difference is that the Catholic schools implement the First Amendment of the Constitution: the freedom to practice our religion. Are then, our parents discriminated against in fulfilling the responsibility of the state and not receiving the funding of parents in public schools?

Every time a bond issue or some improvement to our public schools is promoted, I support it with my public voice. We want strong, thriving public schools. At the same time, I uphold the right to establish private education in the great American tradition. The desired outcome of each system is the same: Educated, contributing citizens.

The third dimension of our schools which I am particularly attentive to is its Catholic Identity. There is no doubt that the Catholic culture which embraced and carried so many of us along in its exercise is being challenged by the secular culture. The headwinds are fierce. For instance, polling predicts that only 25% of the millennial generation (18-35) will identify with any religious denomination.

Our reaction might be to circle the wagons and enter into a very exclusionary mode. That is not the way of the Gospel or the dynamics of our faith.

As we journey with our children, the facet that is most essential is that the faith which is being offered to them be internalized. Along with the Apostles, we utter from the deepest conviction of our hearts: “Jesus is the Son of the Living God, He has the Words of Life.”

As a beginning step in addressing Catholic identity, the Diocese of Des Moines three years ago instituted a program entitled Faith Journey under the direction of John Huynh. Our first participants are the teachers in each of our schools. The methodology is key.

Information: Teaching/evangelizing

Small Faith Sharing Groups: Being in touch and articulating one's faith and being inspired by peers

Prayer: heartfelt, personal, biblically based prayer as the basis for enduring relationships with God.

Faith Journey is carefully monitored and evaluated at each step. In my humble judgment it is working. The vision is that it will ultimately touch our students and parents enabling them to become authentic disciples of the Lord Jesus.

Catholic Schools in the Diocese of Des Moines are on the move. Abundant thanks are owed to Dr. Tracy Bonday, Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Des Moines and Dr. Jerry Deegan, who will lead the planning/steering committee charged with guiding the study. In addition, countless individuals immersed in diocesan education will be involved. It is indeed a community undertaking.

Join me in prayer that it be an enormous success.